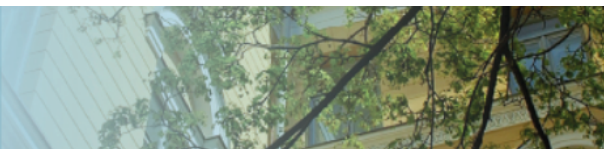


Language and the Scientific Imagination
The 11th International Conference of ISSEI
Language Centre, University of Helsinki (Finland)
28 July – 2 August 2008



Breaking Free of Ego's Gravitational Pull: The Conquest of (Other)

Space in Robert Lepage's *The Far Side of the Moon*

“The Earth is mankind’s cradle, but man was not meant to spend his whole life in a cradle.” Playing on the literal sense of this oft-quoted rationale for space exploration, celebrated Quebec dramatic author/director Robert Lepage turned it into an ambivalent parable of any human being’s moral growth out of the cocoon of primal narcissism to reach beyond self to the Other, in his one-man-show *La face cachée de la Lune* (*The Far Side of the Moon*) of 2000, which he turned into a film in 2003.¹ And yet the thesis unsuccessfully defended by its protagonist Philippe at Quebec City’s Laval University is that this very narcissism is the psychological motivation for space exploration and the race to the Moon, based on the case of this quotation’s author, visionary engineer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935), who, among other pioneering accomplishments, devised the formula that allows spaceships to overcome the pull of Earth’s gravity. For Philippe, the urge to deny earthbound contingencies drives escapist fantasies of space travel to distant worlds. His own journey will be to overcome their pull in the conquest of self so that the exploration of the daunting, alien otherness of one’s neighbour or brother can begin.

For Philippe has not yet found the formula that would allow him to escape the Mother’s attraction field, as his younger brother André reminds him after their mother dies. (It is

Lepage who plays both brothers' roles in this work conceived soon after he lost his own mother.) "It's unhealthy to spend your entire life in the flat where you were raised," André tells Philippe, in a domestic transposition of Tsiolkovsky's dictum about man's destiny to grow out of his earthly cradle and venture into the wider world of outer space. This translates as a call to let go of the accumulated baggage of the past and open space up for an adventurous future to take its place, because this particular cradle is crowded with all the family furniture brought back from the retirement home where their mother spent her final years, as André notes : "You make no room in your life for new things to happen!" Philippe seems resigned to eking out a living as a perpetual student in the philosophy of scientific culture, specialized in the East-West rivalry in space exploration—ironically, since at 42 he has never even been in an airplane... Content to fantasize about space, he resents his kid brother's role as a cruel reminder of workaday reality and of his own limitations and inconsistencies. Already when as children they shared a room in the modest family flat, their sibling rivalry caused Philippe to miss the Moon landing and have a seizure in the fray that ensued when André pulled the plug on the television; this turned out to be an early symptom of a tumour. In the film's present, when cosmonaut Aleksei Leonov fails to show up for their appointment to discuss his theory, Philippe is told at the hotel's reception desk that his idol went back to Moscow early, so as to avoid a snowstorm of which there is no sign. « You can't always believe what the weatherman says », adds the desk clerk; but Philippe knows that full well: a compulsive liar, André works at cable television's weather channel.

Philippe's rival brother and his own fascination for manned space flights were born at the same time, while he was absorbed in the contemplation of the « intra-uterine » churning within a washing machine's window and his pregnant mother suddenly had a dizzy spell in the laundromat. Philippe's reverie then shifted to the dark space inside his mother's womb, to witness there the first space walk in 1965 by Aleksei Leonov, floating at the end of his umbilical cord to the tune of the "Moonlight Sonata", a piece his mother liked to play on the harmonium, now muffled by amniotic fluid. There is thus a psychic equivalence between the womb's inner space and an outer space that reproduces its conditions of suspension in an enfolding environment. This womblike sense of safety fuses with the precarious conditions man faces when venturing outside his spacecraft and beyond his earthly cradle, like a child thrown into existence by the intimate mystery of his conception, and then into the wide world by the trauma of birth. This might confirm Philippe's theory about the narcissism at the root of space exploration, as though man was paradoxically seeking in the weightlessness of the boundless space he fears an outer substitute for the bliss of floating inside a sheltering womb, which would allow him to forego direct contact with the humbling conditions of life on Earth among his peers. The Promethean imagery of the conquest of outer space is thus exposed as regressive, though it will later be revisited or transcended at an inner level.

The rivalry between brothers for the Mother is here transposed into that of the two Cold War superpowers for the Moon, since the cosmonaut Leonov was slated to be the first man on the Moon if the Soviets won the race. Yet it was Leonov who shook hands with the American winners at the Apollo-Soyuz space encounter in 1975. What was his secret,

Philippe wonders, to get over the bitterness of a missed opportunity to fulfill his destiny and make up with the rival who took his place? For such bitterness is the main obstacle to reconciliation, be it between nations or between brothers. Waiting for Leonov at the hotel bar, and getting drunk as it becomes clear his hero will not show up, Philippe confides to the barman that he lacks motivation to reconcile with André because he his brother is « an asshole », whose blithe unawareness he envies more than his worldly success. André takes at face value the dotted lines criss-crossing the Earth as shown from space in weather reports and the intangible divisions they enshrine between Canadian provinces, occupied territories and occupying powers, the “civilized world” and the “Third World”, remaining impervious to the « awareness », the « curiosity », the « great compassion » that move Philippe, as he claims so loudly he does not even notice patrons flee the bar on his account.

This contrast between superficiality and depth extends to the two sides of the Moon explored by the rival superpowers as stand-ins for the two brothers. As Lepage explains in a prologue to the film, the Americans settled for the serene, familiar side facing the Earth, as mapped since Galileo, and were disgruntled to find the tormented features of the far side bearing the names of Russian cosmonauts, writers and scientists (e.g. Tsiolkovsky Crater), since the Soviets were the first to go beyond the boundaries of the visible surface to map this unknown half, facing deep space and exposed to the full brunt of cosmic impacts. The resulting abundance of craters prompted the Americans to derisively call the far side of the Moon its pockmarked, disfigured face, as though to match the dark half of the world under Russian domination behind the Iron Curtain. In a

telling analogy, the large metal bookcase that plays a part in key episodes of the film's story as a cumbersome heirloom from a dead mother had been dubbed by her « The Wall of Shame » when Philippe put it in the middle of the brothers' room in a vain attempt to keep André from intruding in his personal space.

Philippe's blindness to his own narrow focus in setting up barriers between his enlightened self and benighted others, starting with his own brother, turns out to be a good illustration of the view of mankind he puts forward in a home video aimed at giving an idea of the Earth and its denizens to an extra-terrestrial civilization, if selected for interstellar broadcast by the SETI Project as part of a contest open to the general public. As the talk show hostess who introduced the contest put it: « Are we alone in the universe or is there somewhere else another form of intelligence that asks itself the same question? » This can translate as the ethical choice each of us has to make in order to grow up: am I an autonomous monad circumscribed by my familiar universe, or can I put myself in the place of another being independent of me, who also has to struggle to take that leap? Which of the two will take that first step that is always the hardest? For however small it may appear, this truly is the « giant leap for mankind » that each particular human being has to take anew in order to qualify as one, so that Leonov's part in *détente* more than makes up for a missed chance to win the race to the moon. And this is just the journey across vast emotional distances that is taken here by two brothers who feel like enemies, but whose defences will finally fall, given the futility of the effort of maintaining them. Like the space race rivals, they will manage to get over their bitterness and uneasily reach out to each other, sealing their reconciliation with a sushi meal

suggested by the dead body of their mother's accidentally frozen goldfish in its bowl, as though to feast on the cold corpse of the petty self it symbolized, under the guise of celebrating Philippe's unexpected SETI contest victory.

Philippe thus discovers that a candid home-video account of his drab daily life for hypothetical aliens takes him much further into the mysteries of the universe than his pet theory about the psychology of rocket science. For he has casually created an artwork that gets closer to the truth of the human condition than the scholarly dissertation he has been labouring on in vain for years, only to miss his opportunity to rescue it by showing up late at a conference at Moscow's Tsiolkovsky Institute. Lepage suggests Leonov is so serene about not getting to the moon because he was a painter before being a cosmonaut and resumed this initial vocation afterwards. Such a turn to art over science is vindicated by Philippe's SETI video award. Having learned of it from his brother and made up with him over the phone, Philippe is sitting under the cosmonaut's portrait at the Moscow airport when as the Moonlight Sonata is heard; in the film's closing image, he is gently carried away by an anti-gravity apotheosis that takes him to the far side of the Moon — the side that does not hold up a mirror to us, but is exposed to the infinite unknown beyond familiar reference points.

As explained before the opening titles, it was as a mirror of the Earth's surface that humans long saw the Moon. And as Philippe adds in his SETI video, to dispel his anguish before the vast translunar abyss, man enshrined a luminary of his own in the heaven of his imagination, since he « pushed narcissism to the point of creating God in his own

image, » and never ceases to compare himself to Him in his quest for perfection, like the body-builders in the gym club where Philippe gets recognized by his gay brother's boyfriend. Carl cannot wait until the public has access to space as the only way to escape gravity, which he considers his personal enemy because it keeps dragging down his features in the mirror. A similar impulse to escape the mortal finitude of human time seems to drive man's conquest of space, since the film's initial summary of Tsiolkovsky's prophecies culminates in the one that people would some day live on the Moon, whose lower gravity makes it « the ideal refuge of those for whom existence is heavy. » Hence the ambivalence of Romantic Moon-gazing: is it a yearning to escape harsh reality in a more bearable ideal world—a pale copy of ours minus the hard edges of reality, or to go beyond the reference points of an idealized self-image and experience the actual reality of self and other—warts and all? Philippe knows that « as time passes, you become a caricature of yourself », as he tells Carl. He has witnessed his mother's steady decline as kidney failure forced the amputation of ever-wider slices of her once beautiful legs. And yet his theory about denial of death as a motivation for space exploration fails to win over the conference organizer who invited him. If the Russian scholar admits that, since earliest times, « man has been looking everywhere for mirrors in which to gaze at himself », he denies that it is only out of narcissism, and maintains it is also « out of a craving for self-knowledge. And if this craving did not exist, there would be no science, there would be no arts to tell us at once about our virtues, our flaws, our physical wounds and wounds to our self-esteem. » René Girard would agree: *mimesis* fuels the fires of envy in endless rivalry, but also the healthy emulation that makes us identify with role models to make us grow up, in the etymological sense of the word

« education », from the Latin *ex-ducere*, for « what leads us beyond ourselves », or more accurately, above ourselves. —« Higher and higher », in the Russian words of the cosmonauts' mural at the Moscow airport where Philippe awaits his return flight to Montreal under the portrait of his hero Aleksei Leonov, only to float up into outer space as a secular heaven.

This heavenward rapture significantly comes at the culmination of a series of transpositions of the Christian symbolism of the new birth from above. Philippe's first flight is referred to in French as a *baptême de l'air*; like the sacrament of baptism, it integrates the experience of death and the shedding of the old, earthbound man. Because of his former brain tumour, Philippe goes for tests before undergoing pressure changes in flight. It comes out in conversation with the family doctor that his mother's death was self-inflicted, a realization that leaves him shattered just as he is engulfed by a CAT scanner, which subtly shifts into the cabin of his Aeroflot flight as it prepares for take-off, with the same feel of a technological cocoon, evocative at once of space adventure and uterine shelter. These two aspects were already joined in the strong image introducing the film's opening titles. Cleaning his mother's clothes in a laundromat before giving them away, Philippe is waiting for his brother André to show up so they can discuss inheritance arrangements. He then looks into the washing machine's window, which becomes that of the LEM, through which we still see him as it breaks off from the mother-ship to go down to the lunar surface in archival Apollo footage. This anxious break with the maternal sphere is consummated later in the Aeroflot plane, where he sees himself being securely fastened as a little boy by his own mother in the Russian pre-flight

video on passenger safety. The flight itself merges into images of Aleksei Leonov's space encounter with his American colleagues in 1975, up to the famous handshake sealing *détente* between rivals, in the dream Philippe has before waking up at his Moscow hotel. His own adventure will be the same kind of moral breakthrough, rather than the ego boost he was expecting from presenting his theory before an expert audience.

As a *baptême de l'air*, his first flight thus has all the features of a birth from above, as though in answer to Nicodemus' question during his nocturnal interview with Christ: « How can a grown man be born? Can he go back into his mother's womb and be born again? » (John 3, 4) This is just the feat of *Trauerarbeit* Philippe performs in the film's imagery, similar to the labour of childbirth, except in reverse, the child making way for the adult as the old man to the new, as he enters the womblike scanner head first for an airborne journey through space to the disorienting alien world of Russia. There, he will be forced to let go of his fantasies about that other world and the quest for outer space, and to confront his reluctance to accept his brother's world and give the other space. He had to come halfway across the world to appreciate what was closest at hand and deal with the greatest challenge man ever faces: unfinished business at home as the locus of the daunting mystery of the people around us, beyond the abyss of traumatic misunderstandings that are often our only common reference points, and which only unselfconscious compassion can begin to bridge. For spatial relations are not as they seem: while outer space appears as a substitute for the womb and an alibi for refusing to grow up, reaching out to the neighbour is what truly opens up space as something beyond ourselves that claims us as the truth of our subjectivity, no longer the outer object of

narcissistic conquest. In *The Far Side of the Moon*, Lepage has thus performed an overcoming of modernity's « conquest of the world as image » (Heidegger), by poetically shifting its focus to the infinitely near and intimately far that resists objectification, where flights of imagination give way to imagining another's plight. Cinema here becomes the medium of a Copernican revolution in consciousness: a conversion to another space making obsolete egocentric and geocentric worldviews alike.

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¹The film's script has been published as Robert Lepage, *La face cachée de la lune*. Québec: L'Instant même, 2007.